Communities for Children

A New Approach to Policy and Program Development and Delivery

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Non-Government Organisations as Government Partners

Introduction
Australia has a strong tradition of non-government organisations developing and delivering services to support disadvantaged individuals, families and communities. In recent times the role of non-government organisations has evolved from that of service provider to include a broader focus on community development and capacity building, and more recently assisting with training and job placement through the Job Network. The Australian Government has been strongly supportive of this approach and is currently modelling an innovative partnership between government and the non-government sector through the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and specifically the Communities for Children initiative.

The Australian Government recognises that locally based non-government organisations, in consultation with the local community, have the necessary skills, experience and governance structures to understand local issues for families with young children. This innovative approach is breaking new ground in policy development and service delivery. It is an approach that provides a national framework, focused on sustainability and capacity building, which allows for individual approaches at the local level. It recognises that effective support for families and communities requires partnerships with a range of stakeholders that include communities, business, researchers, academics, all levels of government, and the non-government sector. It is an approach that recognises that locally based non-government organisations are best placed with the necessary skills, experience and governance structures to understand local issues for families with young children, and that they know the environment and existing strengths of the community that can be built on, and have the capacity and networks to facilitate local partnerships to address issues.

This paper primarily discusses Communities for Children as an innovative model for policy development and service delivery. It outlines the significant and evolving partnership between non-government organisations and the Australian Government working together to develop and implement social policy in disadvantaged communities in Australia.

Background
In some areas of Australia, and around the world, rapidly changing economic and social environments have impacted adversely on family and community strength and the capacity to deal with issues. Some commentators have referred to a “…perceived decline in social cohesion which has placed stress on family and social functioning”¹. In Australia, these economic and social changes can in part be attributed to:

- labour market changes, with growth in technology and service industries;
- population movements, with most Australians living in or moving to urban areas;
- changing family structures, with increased family breakdown and less reliance on the extended family.

Rapid economic and social changes can manifest as serious problems in the developmental health and well being of children, young people and families. This can include increased child abuse, early school failure, mental health problems, increased rates of teenage pregnancy, and relationship and family breakdown. The seeds for poor outcomes like drug dependency, school failure, welfare dependency, poor health and criminal behaviour, are usually planted in a child’s early years, and adverse conditions in early childhood establish risks. The burden and cost of addressing these risks are high and increase over time.

Evidence suggests that the most effective way to address the problems identified is before they become entrenched, or to prevent them happening in the first place. The importance of early childhood intervention and prevention is based on the premise that the first few years of a child’s development are crucial in setting the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health outcomes and that risks can be offset by good antenatal and maternal nutrition, positive attention from parents, family harmony, and participation in social networks. Investment in early childhood development has been found to increase the efficiency of primary-school investments and human capital formation, foster valued social behaviour, reduce social welfare costs, stimulate community development, and help mothers become income earners. This investment in community development also builds stronger families and communities.

It has been recognised that strong families and communities create an environment where the incidence of these problems is lessened and where they do occur, can be more effectively resolved. The Australian Government’s view is that better outcomes for families and communities requires a comprehensive and coordinated response focused on prevention, early detection and early intervention, and based on partnerships with the community.

**Engaging the Community**

Hugh Mackay, respected Australian social researcher and writer, says that though Australians have a sense of disengagement from the national agenda and a declining engagement in community life, they have a desire to *reconnect with ‘the herd’*...to obtain

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a stronger sense of identity and of emotional security from re-creating communal connections…⁶. The challenge therefore is how to re-engage the community.

Much of the social policy direction of the Australian Government over the past few years has been underpinned by the concept of engaging the community. The distinguishing feature of this community engagement approach is increasing the push to develop partnerships between individuals, families, business, government, welfare and charitable organisations collaborating to solve social and economic problems⁷. The Australian Government seeks advice from experts in the business, research, academic and community sectors; builds collaborative relationships with state, territory and local governments; empowers communities; and concentrates on preventative, rather than reactive policies. The most significant development in Australian social policy however has been the evolving role of non-government organisations from primarily service provision to partnering with government in policy development and program management. Engaging non-government organisations utilises community expertise and ensures local ownership and ‘bottom-up’ responses. It also recognises that by engaging the non-government sector the Australian Government provides stronger and more sustainable outcomes for children and families.

**Stronger Families and Communities Strategy**

The key focus of the Australian Government’s $490 million Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is to positively impact on early childhood development. It seeks to achieve better outcomes for young children aged 0-5 and their families, and is based on the principles of early intervention and prevention. It recognises that families and communities have differing needs and strengths that can be built on, including the range of services available to support children and families, the existing infrastructure, and/or a strong volunteering base.

Partnerships are an important ingredient in building social capital and strong, self-reliant communities; communities are more likely to find sustainable solutions to local issues through strategic partnerships with local agencies and stakeholders. The Strategy builds on the principles of community engagement and ownership by giving communities a mandate to identify and resolve their own issues by facilitating partnerships between service providers, community members, non-government organisations, business and all levels of government. The Strategy recognises that effective early childhood intervention is not only about supporting children in the early years, but also supporting their parents, neighbourhoods and the wider community.

Australian Government policy has traditionally been determined at a national level and delivered in a national framework that has at times been less able to take into account local circumstances and needs. In the Stronger Family and Communities Strategy however, the Australian Government is breaking new and innovative ground in policy

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development and service delivery by providing a national framework focused on sustainability and capacity building which allows for individual approaches at the local level.

**Communities for Children Initiative**

A variety of models for implementing early intervention programs have been identified, ranging from single stand-alone projects to comprehensive service delivery provided through a coordinating group composed of representatives from an array of child and family services\(^8\). The latter has been selected as the model for the Communities for Children initiative funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

The Communities for Children initiative has adopted a place-based approach to policy development and service delivery. A place-based approach is one that considers the particular issues and characteristics of a community and tailors social policy interventions and their delivery mechanisms accordingly. It is a response that improves the coordination and administration of public, private and community sector activity, particularly in areas experiencing high levels of economic and social disadvantage\(^9\). A place-based approach links service providers under a lead agency that oversees broad community consultation, which includes input from the business, community and government sectors. The OECD has identified three key outcomes that result from an effective place-based approach:

- more flexible coordinated use of mainstream policies;
- greater impact from existing resources;
- effective policy formulation and implementation based on a partnership approach between stakeholders\(^10\).

The Communities for Children initiative is an innovative model that partners non-government organisations with the Australian Government to facilitate a strategic and sustainable approach to early childhood development, in consultation with community stakeholders. Non-government organisations work in collaboration with the community to develop and implement early childhood focused strategic plans specifically tailored to community needs. It is a capacity building approach that empowers both the non-government organisation and the community.

Capacity building, early intervention initiatives require both performance and process evaluation. To inform us how the new model is working, a consortium of expert evaluators from non-government organisations has developed a national framework to evaluate the Communities for Children initiative. The framework identifies a number of priority areas – healthy young families; supporting families and parents; early learning

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\(^8\) Centre for Community Health, *The Early Years Project: Refocusing community based services for young children and their families: A Literature Review*, Australia, April 2003


and care; child friendly communities; and family and children’s services working effectively. The consortium will address these issues and evaluate how the Communities for Children model has been implemented in each site, including the factors that helped or hindered local development of the model. It will be a quantitative and qualitative evaluation, enriched and supported by stories from the Communities for Children communities.

Non-Government Organisations

Non-government organisations can be defined as non-profit groups that combine resource mobilisation, information provision, and activism to advocate for changes in certain areas. In Australia, non-government organisations provide a broad range of social services from welfare and education to conservation, recreation and health and are an integral part of Australia’s economic, societal and political system. They emerged during the mid to late 19th century and pre-date government provision of social welfare services to people in need. The Australian Industry Commission refers to non-government organisations as crucial partner(s) with business and government.

There are over 700,000 non-government organisations in Australia, many of which are small and dependent on the voluntary contribution of members. As well as volunteers, 600,000 people are formally employed by non-government organisations, representing 6.8% of the Australian workforce; 26% of these are employed in social services. Australia’s non-government sector is of comparable proportion to that of the United States, is larger than that in the United Kingdom and most other European countries, but smaller than the non-government sector in the Netherlands.

In 2002, non-government organisations in Australia had an income of AU$33.5 billion and made an economic contribution greater than the communications industry and equal to that of the agriculture industry. Their principal sources of income were from the sale of goods and services (58%), government grants and contracts (30%), and donations (9%).

Non-government organisations in Australia add value and make a significant contribution to the community by:

- using their expertise to inform and implement government policy;
- promoting equity, social inclusion and alleviating the effects of poverty and other disadvantage;
- supporting and empowering service users and volunteers;

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13 ibid
15 ibid
16 ibid
17 ibid
• building links between the public sector and communities;
• providing high quality services that are complementary or additional to public services; and
• identifying new needs and better ways of meeting existing needs.

Evolving Role of Non-Government Organisations
The evolving engagement of the community in the political environment has been appreciated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), though the emergence of new relations between executive governments and citizens in policy-making are not intended to reduce or replace traditional representative government nor the central role of parliaments. In the growing worldwide demand for transparency, accountability and participation, the OECD provides a list of reasons for increasing the levels of public participation in the work of government, including to:
• provide governments with the opportunity to tap into wider sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions to meet the increasing complexity of policy-making;
• meet the challenges of the information society and provide better and faster interactions with the community;
• enable public input to be integrated into the policy-making process;
• respond to demands for greater government transparency and accountability; and
• strengthen public trust in government and reverse declining confidence in public institutions.

The tradition of ‘citizens having little further input once votes are cast’ was becoming outdated in Australia by the 1960s. The role of non-government organisations began to evolve to that of intermediaries between the community and government. They began to convey information about the needs and preferences of the community, provided a voice for marginalised groups and became an essential component in a robust democracy.

In Australia, non-government organisations have had a strong tradition of delivering services to support disadvantaged individuals, families and communities. In recent times, the role of non-government organisations has been evolving from that of service provider to a broader focus on community development and capacity building. The participation of non-government organisations in the public policy process is now accepted and the Australian Government has been supportive of this change.

18 New South Wales Premier’s Department, Review of Grants Administration, Sydney, 2002
The Australian Government recognises that locally based non-government organisations, in consultation with the local community, have the necessary skills, experience and governance structures to understand local issues for families with young children. They also know the local environment and are aware of the existing strengths of the community that can be built on, and have the capacity and networks to facilitate local partnerships to address local issues.

**Mission Australia**

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organisation with almost 280 community, employment and training services in every state and territory in Australia. In 2004 it supported over 220,000 Australians. Mission Australia has a strong commitment to research, social policy and advocacy. It is at the forefront of comprehensive early intervention approaches in disadvantaged communities, in particular through the ground breaking *Pathways to Prevention* initiative in the Inala community of Brisbane, Queensland.

The seminal report *Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*[^22], prepared by an interdisciplinary research team and released by the Australian Government in 1999, recommended the development of a community based, early intervention demonstration project. The aim of the proposal was to target multiple risk and protective factors at multiple levels (individual, family, immediate social group and the larger community) and at multiple life phases and transition points in an individual’s development. The report noted that this required a whole of community intervention model that incorporates a range of programs and services, rather than an intervention model built around a single program. It also requires a process of ‘community building’ that helps to create an inclusive, ‘child friendly’ or ‘family supportive’ environment that promotes the healthy, prosocial development of children. The report highlighted the importance of identifying and engaging a range of relevant community members, agencies and societal institutions and of developing a comprehensive range of strategies.

Following release of the report, conceptual work for a pilot project began in late 1999, with the *Pathways to Prevention* project initiated in 2001. The project is a partnership between Mission Australia and Griffith University, with support from a range of research, philanthropic and government agencies.

The *Pathways to Prevention Project* is a universal, early intervention, crime prevention project focused on the transition to school. The project was implemented in Inala, the most disadvantaged urban area in Brisbane. It provides a comprehensive intervention that integrates action at individual, family, school and community levels[^23]. The Project incorporates both family-based and school-based programs within a community development framework. As such, the project provides an innovative intervention model.

[^22]: Strategic Partners Pty Ltd, *Pathways to Prevention - Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*, Attorney General’s Department, Canberra, 1999
[^23]: Homel R, *The Pathways to Prevention Project: one model for working in disadvantaged communities throughout Australia – an overview*, Griffith University, February 2004
within which a number of partners work together sharing a common strategic focus: supporting families in promoting their young children’s cognitive, social and emotional development.

The *Pathways to Prevention* project was fully implemented in 2002 and has a comprehensive range of programs and activities, with the family and school-based programs being mutually supportive. Programs and activities include: individual and family counseling; supported playgroups (Indigenous, Vietnamese, Samoan and Tongan), language and literacy programs, parenting programs, pre-school information sessions, English classes for parents, a social skills program, school holiday programs, nutrition workshops and community development activities. The project has been extensively evaluated and has shown major positive results for children, caregivers and family. The evaluation has also contributed to the further development of the project.

**Non-Government Organisations and Communities for Children**

The Australian Government believes that while public servants will deliver some programs, services will be increasingly contract managed through a network of private sector and community-based non-government organisations. The most innovative approach to engaging non-government organisations in developing policy and implementing programs is exemplified in the Communities for Children initiative. It is a capacity building model that acknowledges the importance of a vibrant non-government sector in solving social problems.

The Communities for Children initiative responds in part to the need to improve the coordination of public, private and community sector activity, particularly in areas experiencing high levels of economic and social disadvantage. It is an approach that considers the particular issues and characteristics of a community and tailors social policy interventions and service delivery mechanisms accordingly. The Communities for Children initiative links service providers under a lead non-government organisation that facilitates community consultation with representatives from the community, business, research, academic and government sectors. When partnering with non-government organisations to develop and implement the Communities for Children initiative, Government is purchasing their expertise, governance structures, financial management skills, infrastructure and community connections and networks.

Seven non-government organisations provided significant initial input into the development of the Community for Children initiative. For example, the Pathways to Prevention program conducted by Mission Australia, contributed significantly to initial discussions on the design of the Communities for Children model. The development of funding agreements, service provider guidelines, strategic plan and progress report templates, etc were undertaken in collaboration with non-government organisations. The partnership between the Australian Government and non-government organisations ensures that Communities for Children will continue to evolve in a dynamic policy-

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program environment with issues that arise addressed through face-to-face meetings, teleconferences, workshops, policy circulars and access to researchers and academics through the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. 

While the Australian Government sets the broad policy framework for what non-government organisations are expected to achieve under Communities for Children, how outcomes are achieved is at the discretion of the non-government organisation, in consultation with the local community. Non-government organisations identify local early childhood issues and the strengths in the community to address these issues. They cultivate cooperative and collaborative relationships with community stakeholders to develop and implement local solutions in flexible and innovative ways that best reflect local circumstances. For example, the Government has identified healthy young families with improved ante and post-natal health and improved child physical health and development as key outcomes for Communities for Children; the non-government organisation develops strategies and approaches based on evidence to achieve these outcomes. This is an approach that provides non-government organisations with the opportunity to draw on and develop their expertise.

The Communities for Children model enables non-government organisations to undertake flexible and responsive planning and project management in order to take account of unexpected opportunities or difficulties. Strategic plans identify potential challenges around proposed activities and outline strategies to address these risks. Strategic plans may also include contingency funding to ensure that money is available to respond to unintended problems or developing needs in the community. Non-government organisations have the local experience, capacity and resources to be flexible and responsive in their planning and project management at a local level.

Under Communities for Children, non-government organisations manage funding agreements with individual service providers. Social policy observers feel that the effect of making funding the responsibility of the non-government organisation, results in the creation of a ‘development corporation’; a small amount of funding can attract additional funds, achieve cooperation and be …a considerable advantage in dealing with input focused agencies. It also leaves the Department of Family and Community Services to review and refine broader policy, including the development of policy and reporting frameworks; providing policy advice; undertaking an advisory role; and maintaining ongoing liaison with non-government organisations. The Department is also responsible for approving the approaches identified by non-government organisations in strategic plans and monitors progress through quarterly reports. The Department thus takes a new

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25 The Australian Research Alliance For Children and Youth (ARACY) is a national collaboration of researchers and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines working together for a better future for Australian children.
26 The Strategic Plan is the document that sets out the long-term goals for the community over the life of the Communities for Children initiative and includes the broad strategies for achieving outcomes within the community and the amount of funding required.
27 Mant J, Place Management: why it works and how to do it, UTS, Sydney, 1998
advisory and monitoring role in the Communities for Children initiative, rather than directly managing the projects undertaken in each community.

Non-government organisations may tender individually or as a consortium to implement a Communities for Children program. For example, Mission Australia has been funded $3 million to implement the initiative in Miller in the south west of Sydney. The Miller site has an ethnically and socio-economically diverse population across four suburbs with 2,060 children under five. In contrast, a consortium of two non-government organisations lead by Mission Australia, receive funding of $3 million to implement the initiative in the Greater Dandenong area. This area has a total population of 44,000 including 3,300 children under five. It has high levels of unemployment, low incomes and a large number of people from culturally diverse backgrounds, many of whom experience social isolation. A consortium also implement the initiative in remote East Kimberley in Western Australia; East Kimberley has a population of 14,500 people across 25,000 kilometres in rural and remote communities, including over 100 small Indigenous communities.

The activities being implemented by non-government organisations under the Communities for Children initiative are broad, comprehensive and locally responsive. Some of these activities include:

- promoting breastfeeding, supporting new parents, bonding and reading to children;
- involving fathers in parenting and developing links with grandparents;
- developing child-friendly communities with supportive, integrated children and family services and improved access to public facilities;
- improving the health, wellbeing and participation of Indigenous children;
- increasing the participation rates of children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities in playgroups and transition to school programs;
- developing professional training programs for early childhood workers;
- mapping local early childhood services; and
- using early intervention and prevention research to inform policy formulation, service delivery and professional practice.

Since its announcement in April 2004, significant progress has been made in implementing the Communities for Children initiative. Non-government organisations have been selected to implement early childhood strategies in 33 sites across Australia. These sites are in urban, regional, rural and remote areas and are guaranteed funding for four years. A tender process has recently selected appropriate non-government organisations for an additional ten sites.

**Advantages of Engaging Non-Government Organisations**

Funding non-government organisations to deliver the Communities for Children initiative as collaborative partners with the Australian Government has provided significant advantages for local communities for a number of reasons.
Non-government organisations have been selected to deliver the initiative on the basis of a range of criteria including their experience in delivering large and complex programs, their ability to draw on existing organisational infrastructure and resources, and their connection to the community and community experts. They were also selected because of their understanding of early childhood issues and interventions, including a strong knowledge of early childhood evidence. As well, large non-government organisations are seen to have the necessary governance structures to effectively administer public money on behalf of the Australian Government.

The Communities for Children model builds on the existing relationships and community trust in locally based non-government organisations that have a demonstrated presence and profile in both the local and broader communities. The non-government organisations selected have generally been delivering services in a community for many years and as a result have extensive understanding of the issues faced by families and children. They also understand service delivery and are connected with local early childhood stakeholders.

Locally based non-government organisations are considered to be well placed to understand and respond to local issues for families and children. There is no single model or design for strengthening communities - the best approaches are those that arise from local circumstances or are tailored to suit them. Local non-government organisations are more aware of the realities of their own environments and have a better sense of what will work and what will not.

The Communities for Children approach recognises the importance of flexible, responsive planning and project management that can take account of unexpected opportunities or difficulties. While four year funding demonstrates a longer-term commitment to achieving positive outcomes, it also means that community needs are likely to evolve over this period. Large non-government organisations have the experience, capacity and resources to be flexible and responsive in their planning and project management in order to take into account changing community needs.

The Communities for Children initiative has been developed on the principle of sustainability. Locally based non-government organisations are well placed to work towards the sustainability of Communities for Children outcomes, processes and funding, where appropriate, beyond the duration of the initiative. This is in part due to their established and proven resources, expertise, leadership and engagement in the community.

Non-government organisations are adept in brokering relationships and have the potential to unite small community organisations to work towards a common purpose. They are also able to assist small organisations develop organisational capacity by providing leadership and vision, management and planning, fiscal planning and practice, and operational support. Additionally, large national non-governments organisations are well
placed to assume a leadership role in the development of early childhood, early intervention practice and theory and to test new ideas.

**Conclusion**

The Australian Government has redefined the role of non-government organisations in Australia. Instead of receiving government funding for service provision, non-government organisations are engaged as partners with Government to develop, implement and deliver whole-of-community approaches to early childhood issues, in consultation with the local community.

The Communities for Children model is forging a new approach to policy development and service delivery. It provides a national framework that enables locally based non-government organisations define and work towards outcomes that are specifically relevant to their communities. As well, the non-government organisations administer large amounts of funds to other agencies on behalf of the Australian Government. It is a new and innovative approach that recognises that non-government organisations are best placed to understand local issues for families with young children, how they should be addressed, and which stakeholders to engage to effect change and bring about better outcomes.

In the past, non-government organisations have expressed concern regarding the impact of traditional funding arrangements on relationships with other service providers, particularly in regard to building social capital. Non-government organisations have argued that some of their most important work is not quantifiable – work in building community cohesion, linking people to others, bringing diverse groups together, building individual capacity and community capacity. The Communities for Children initiative addresses these concerns by specifically funding non-government organisations to develop social capital and build capacity in their community through developing partnerships and facilitating networking opportunities.

Non-government organisations have also expressed concerned that the shift to contracting would see a far greater focus on direct service delivery to the detriment of innovative prevention or development work. The Communities for Children initiative has allayed this fear by funding non-government organisations to develop and implement innovative early intervention programs for children aged up to five years, their families and communities.

Communities for Children is an innovative partnership between the Australian Government and non-government organisations. It is a partnership model that can be replicated in different environments. It is a model with foundations in community development and capacity building approaches that focus specifically on the significance

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of partnerships and collaborative action at the local level. It recognises that developing and implementing local solutions to local issues is instrumental in achieving sustainable outcomes.

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